



## **ST-Bar Ranch Fuels Reduction/Range Rehabilitation Project**

### **Nebraska and South Dakota**

The Winnebago Agency, working closely with the Santee Sioux Nation, has undertaken the ST-Bar Ranch Fuels Reduction/Range Rehabilitation Project (Project) with the long term goal of restoring the mid-grass prairie ecosystem. The Project area is within Fire Regime Group II, with an historical fire return interval of 7 to 10 years, and covers much of the 115,000 acres of the Santee Sioux Indian Reservation along the Missouri River in northeast Nebraska. Fire exclusion over the past 100 years perpetuated the encroachment of eastern juniper (also known as eastern red cedar) and other non-native flora over much of the Santee Sioux Reservation. Consequently, fuel loadings have accelerated well beyond historic levels and are conducive to conflagration fire; valuable rangelands have been significantly reduced or totally choked out in many areas; native prairie grasslands, once dominated by Big Bluestem, Little Bluestem, Indian Grass and Green Needle Grass, are significantly altered from a healthy condition class 1 to a degraded condition class 3 at high risk of losing key ecosystem components to wildfire.

Since the Project's inception in June of 2001, 800 to 1,200 acres of treatment have been accomplished annually. The work has involved the cooperation of four tribal communities including the Santee Sioux Nation, Omaha Tribe of Nebraska, Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska and Yankton Sioux Tribe of South Dakota as well as two BIA Agencies, Winnebago and Yankton. In addition, there has been participation from four other tribal communities and agencies, including Rosebud, Lower Brule, Cheyenne River and Crow Creek, all BIA Agencies within the Great Plains Region. Included within the totality of the Project has been participation by the United States Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the State-chartered Natural Resources Conservation District.

Under the direction and guidance of the staff of the Winnebago Agency, a team consisting of members of the referenced tribes was assembled to accomplish a multi-faceted task with the goal being to enhance the productivity of the native rangeland for livestock and wildlife production as well as restoring the balance to the mid-grass prairie ecosystem. The Project goal of ecosystem restoration and productivity enhancement has involved four distinct tasks: 1) Mechanical clearing of hazardous fuels (primarily eastern red cedar) with chain saws; 2) Hand piling of mechanically cleared slash; 3) Burning of the piled slash; 4) Broadcast burning of the rangeland to reintroduce fire. The Agency recognized from the outset that there was an opportunity to benefit not only the ecosystem, but the economically disadvantaged communities being served. As such, all activities were designed to provide for training and employment opportunities as well as economic development by adding to the economic activities within the communities.

Initially the Agency recognized that there was a small core group within the communities that met a basic need for all aspects of the project, that being that they were physically fit and had basic EFF fire training. Working closely with the Santee Sioux Nation, a mechanism was identified whereby the Tribe, utilizing its existing expertise in P.L 638 contracting, would provide for a large portion of the logistical needs associated with such a project. The Tribe took on the task of employing the labor pool, while the Agency cooperatively provided the needed on-site

guidance to carry out the work. Through this cooperation, the Agency and Tribe provide on-going employment through the season (June until the weather window closes in December). During the work periods, on the job training takes place with experienced sawyers and senior fire fighters supervising lesser-trained individuals in order to expand their knowledge base, skills and future employment opportunities. Through this process each participant is encouraged to obtain as much experience and training within the fire organization as they desire and are capable of achieving.

While the training and employment goals are significant, cost containment is always an issue with any field project. Recognizing that crew maintenance is a critical need with significant and ongoing costs (staffing generally consists of 15 to 35 individuals on the ground at any one time). To address the logistics of managing a field project located 120 miles from the core Agency, the crew is required to “spike out” for the duration of the work period. During periods requiring more substantial shelter, the Tribe’s Wildlife and Parks Department has provided a bunkhouse for the crew. Food, water and sanitation are provided by local vendors while shower facilities are provided by the local school system. In this manner, the economic benefits of a project like this one tend to flow within the community.

The ST-Bar Ranch Project employs 3 of the 4 primary goals of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy: 1) Reduce hazardous fuel; 2) Restore fire-adapted ecosystems; 3) Promote community assistance for accomplishing these goals. The Project also correlates directly, at the local level, to the NFP/Cohesive Strategy Goal of “Coordinating an aggressive, collaborative approach for reducing wildland fire risk to communities, and to restore and maintain land health within fire-prone areas” at the same time meeting the criteria under “Premise, Purpose and Long-Term Outcomes for People and Communities, Natural Resources, Expenditures and the National-Scale Fuel Treatment Program to Stop Increase in Risk to Both Communities and Ecosystems”.